

# Oil well blowout at Obed Wild and Scenic River

by Pat O'Dell and Rick Dawson

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ON THE AFTERNOON OF FRIDAY, 18 JULY 2002 in Morgan County, Tennessee, oil and gas drillers labored on a bluff high above the confluence of Clear and White Creeks of the Obed Wild and Scenic River. The crew was ill-prepared for what they would find: a high-pressure, high-flow-rate oil zone. Oil surged into the well from 2,500 feet below the surface, quickly filling a pit at ground level. With no equipment for closing the well, the crew's grip on the situation was tenuous at best. Within hours, oil and gas poured from the well while workers scrambled to contain the worst of the mounting spill volume with vacuum trucks and hurriedly built pits and dikes. The crew was unable to prevent the stream of oil from seeping into the ground, breaching dikes, and cascading down the cliffs into the creeks of Obed Wild and Scenic River. On Saturday morning, a single spark became a huge fireball that ate its way through volatile vapors rising from the oiled waters, leaving pools and trails of burning oil in its wake.

By Saturday afternoon, the response to this event was in full swing as local, state, and federal emergency workers converged on the site. Firefighters suppressed the incidental fires, and specialized oil well firefighters mobilized from Texas to squelch the well fire. Park staff joined in the battle by providing operational assistance and important natural resource information to incident command. Once the fire ended, an NPS petroleum engineer with the Geologic Resources Division was called in to assess remaining threats

to park resources posed by the oil well. Also, a team of experts from the National Park Service, the State of Tennessee, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service directed a natural resource damage assessment. Under the Oil Pollution Act, the company responsible for the spill is liable for all oil removal costs and damage caused by the spill, including compensation for affected natural resources. The measure of natural resource damage is the cost of restoring, rehabilitating, replacing, or acquiring the equivalent of the damaged natural resources, the loss in value of the resource pending restoration, plus the reasonable cost of assessing those damages.

Response and damage assessment are critical elements of a common challenge: balancing the rights and needs of extractive mining and petroleum industries while ensuring protection of parks' valued resources. The National Park Service is becoming more proficient at incident response and the process of damage assessment—good news for parks like Obed and Big South Fork, which are situated in Tennessee's most prolific mineral production areas. The most important task is making the industry and its regulators aware of the locations and values of important natural resources like those found in the Obed Wild and Scenic River. Once these resources are brought to their attention, oil and gas developers generally begin taking the necessary steps to protect them.

Renewed interest in prevention nearly always follows an accident of this size, and rightly so. Within days the State of Tennessee directed operators to use blowout prevention equipment and is now in the process of reviewing its entire oil and gas program to avoid a repeat disaster. The National Park Service will participate in that review process to ensure that park resources are protected. This action comes just in time, as news of the gusher has excited the oil and gas community and new wells are already being drilled in drainages near the park. The balancing act continues. ■

A fiery oil well blowout rages on a bluff above Obed Wild and Scenic River, dumping petroleum into Clear Creek in the national park. Scorched trees along the bank and pockets of burning oil are remnants of the fireball that roared through the valley hours earlier.



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